



University
of Glasgow

Boyle, R. (2013) Reflections on communication and sport on journalism and digital culture. *Communication and Sport*, 1 (1-2). pp. 88-99. ISSN 2167-4795

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Deposited on: 26 September 2013

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Communication & Sport

Raymond Boyle: On Journalism and Digital Culture

Introduction: Why Communication and Sport Matters

In many ways sport matters because of what it tells us about aspects of society rather than specifically about the nature of sporting competition. At its most basic level, sport offers an insight into character, human nature (the best and worst of) and human creativity. It reveals aspects of individual and collective-identity and its rich diversity of forms (when does a game become a sport?) allows us to project our own feelings and emotions through a cultural activity either at the 'live' event or through mediated sporting discourse. It is the ability of sport to connect with the emotional, often rather than the rationale element within us that makes it so compelling. To take the mundane and elevate it into something more than the sum of its parts is ability that sport can perform. The ability to communicate this individually and collectively is a core part of the enduring appeal that this cultural form has. It remains an uncertain cultural form on which to overtly express any sense of national identity of course, given that the competitive nature of elite team sports mean that failure is more often likely to come your way than success. In Scotland for example, starved of footballing success at international level despite the sport being woven the fabric of the country's cultural life, it has been said that 'It's the hope that kills us'. Each new football tournament tantalizingly offering the possibility of redemption and success for Scotland, as each event or tournament ensures that brief moments of success and the converse sense of sustained failure get ever more embedded into the national psyche.

Of course sport matters because in the 21st century is provides a plethora of media content that can drive business models, attract sponsors, advertisers and subscribers to a range of digital platforms. Elite and professional sport has also become deeply intertwined with the contours of national and international capital. Understanding this evolving complex process, its implications and impact on us tell us much about the society we are, our priorities, our desires and aspirations. The mediation of sport and its connecting discourses into the domain of politics, economics and culture more generally all offer rich and illuminating avenues into the relationship between media and society and the power structures that shape and influence our daily existence. To be interested then in the relationship between communication and sport, is to be fascinated and intrigued by the society that produces and sustains such a relationship. Understanding any such society seems to me an important starting point for any communications scholar.

My Journey with Communication and Sport

I have been teaching about and researching the relationship between sports and the media for over twenty years. As a media and history undergraduate with a Communications Masters I began developing university courses in media and sport in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At that time, the struggle was to get sport taken seriously within the media and communication field that was itself still establishing its credibility within the academy in the UK. As a result there was significantly less research material around to draw on than is the case for university teachers today. One name dominated the very brief course reading list on my first Media Sports course and that was Garry Whannel. In the UK, Garry was the founding father of contemporary media sports research. He gave it focus, credibility and legitimized a topic for a generation of new scholars who still often had to make the case to colleagues of why sport mattered. Here are some of the books that inspired me to take media and sport seriously, and confirmed my belief that through such analysis, sports media culture could offer real insights into the broader relationship between culture, economy and politics. They give a sense of both my own development as a researcher, but also offer a snapshot of how the research field in communication and sports, particularly in the UK began to evolve in the 1980s and 1990s.

Garry Whannel (1983) *Blowing the Whistle: The Politics of Sport*: As mentioned above, Whannel was the founding father of the study of media and sports in the UK and beyond. This book (updated and re-issued in 2008) was the first to set out sports broader cultural and political position in an accessible and exciting manner. Here was how to write in an academically informed manner, but also for a more general readership. John Clarke and Chas Critcher (1985) *The Devil Makes Work: Leisure in Capitalist Britain*. The influential Centre for the Study of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) based at Birmingham University informed the thinking of a book that mapped out, with brilliant clarity, why leisure matters in public policy and politics. Sport was part of the focus, but this book provided a broader political context for much of the work to come in this area over the next decade.

Given the paucity of academic books on media and sport in the 1980s and early 1990s, books by writers and journalists on sport were often important in giving access to a professional milieu little discussed or analyzed in the academy and even in mainstream sports journalism in the UK. Burn (1986) *Pocket Money: Bad-Boys, Business-Heads, and Boom-Time Snooker*. This remains one of my favourite books about sport. Written by the journalist and novelist Gordon Burn, who sadly passed away in 2009, it shows what you can do if you can get access to sports inner sanctuary and are brave and talented enough to be able to make sense of this world for the reader. In this case the subject was the exploding world of snooker and television. It captures a sport transformed by television and struggling to come to terms with the changes this brings. It inspired me to write my undergraduate thesis on snooker and television and along the way

interview some of the key players in snooker's television story including BBC producer Nick Hunter and manager and promoter Barry Hearn. It's one of the sports books I often find myself returning to for its clarity, wit and brilliant observational passages.

John Hargreaves (1987) *Sport, Power and Culture: A Social and Historical Analysis of Popular Sports in Britain*. This was a sweeping book that re-framed the thinking about the place of sport in politics, culture and economy. With its historical focus it reminded us how the trajectory of sports culture has always been bound up with the politics and culture of its time. Alan Tomlinson and Garry Whannel (1987) *Off the Ball: Football World Cup*. This was a collection of essays about the cultural and political role of football in society. This book includes a piece by Stuart Cosgrove, now a senior Channel 4 executive in the UK examining the role of football on the Scottish national psyche and introduced me to the work of sports sociologist Alan Tomlinson, who along with John Sugden have been at the forefront of investigative sports studies from within the academy in the last 20 years.

Kevin McCarra and Pat Woods (1988) *One Afternoon in Lisbon*. A simple idea, brilliantly executed. Based on interviews with the Celtic football players who were part of the first British team to win the UEFA European Cup in 1967, this is a fantastic example of placing sport in its broader cultural context. It demonstrates the important methodological advantages of using interviews as part of the research process and also highlights the central nature of narrative in shaping sporting discourse. Kevin McCarra is now Chief Football Writer with *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK.

Geoffrey Lawrence and David Rowe (eds) (1987) *Power Play: The Commercialisation of Australian Sport*. This is a collection of essays that highlighted the importance of understanding the political economy of sports and the nature of the ways they interface with the media and promotional industries. It signified the growing interest from within the academy in Australia in sport and its wider cultural impact, and in that sense they were ahead of the UK in developing a critical body of work in this area. It introduced me to the work of David Rowe, whose research would continue to influence me over the next twenty years.

Michael R. Real (1989) *Super Media*. An important book in the study of sports spectacle that while not overly focused on sport still influenced much subsequent writing about sports and the role of spectacle. Garry Whannel (1992) *Fields in Vision: Television, Sport and Cultural Transformation*. This was the book that launched media sports communication books in the UK. Combining a political economy approach as well as a concern with issues of cultural representations, this was the book that set the benchmark for what a media and communications study of television and sport could achieve.

By the early 1990s, my own work with colleagues such Neil Blain and Hugh O'Donnell

and later Richard Haynes was focusing on issues around sport, media and national identity, and the growing centrality of sport as a form of media content in a rapidly changing media environment from satellite and cable delivery systems in the 1980s, through the internet in the 1990s to the digital environment of the 2000s. Running through much of this work was an interest in various forms of journalism and sports journalism specifically increasingly became the focus of my research. Two books, both written by journalists helped inspire my research development. The strangely named *Laptop Dancing and the Nanny Goat Mambo: A Sportswriter's Year* (2003) by the brilliant *Irish Times* sportswriter Tom Humphries remains for me one of the most insightful, honest and funny books written about sports journalism, its practice, pressures and the changing relationship between the print media and the emerging new breed of sporting stars. Any student wishing to be a sports journalist would do well to read his account of covering international sports events. While cycling journalist Jeremy Whittle's *Bad Blood: The Secret Life of the Tour De France* (2008) and its account of the Tour and the complicit nature of sports journalism in failing to tell the true story shaping that sport remains a compelling and brave piece about the danger for all journalists of 'traveling too close to the circus'.

Focus "Journalism and Digital Culture"

Journalists have always been important cultural intermediaries between sports and society. When early 20th century boxing promoters arranged events, journalists were a key part in promoting and selling the event in a pre-television age. Sports journalists were also the myth makers of sporting icons as they embellished the on field abilities of sports stars and ignored any of the off-field activities of these stars that might besmirch the carefully constructed perception of sporting icons among the wider public. In the process, some journalists, or in the US, sportswriters became as big as the athletes they covered. When Grantland Rice, syndicated coast to coast in the US, came to town, crowds often gathered to catch a glimpse of this chronicler of modern America (Fountain, 1993; Inabinett, 1994).

Fast forward to the end of the 20th century and a well established relationship between sports and media had been laid down. It varied slightly from country to country or across media markets, but elite sport was increasingly financially underwritten by television, with the attendant access and rights that came bundled with this arrangement. While the print journalists, in many ways the dominate media sports sector for much of the 20th century, were increasingly relegated to battling among themselves in a medium where exclusivity was increasingly usurped by 24/7 rolling news while working in an industry being transformed and re-structured by the arrival of digital technology.

While marketisation, commercialization and the internationalization of the media-sports nexus was continuing apace, in these processes both sport and journalism were being re-cast and transformed. Technology tends to be disruptive of existing patterns and practice. For journalists the transition from the analogue to digital age brought with it both pleasure and pain. In an age of 24/7 media output, and rolling deadlines, the 'always on' journalist covering sports was also to be a blogger, a tweeter and continually filing (or uploading) copy for a range of platforms (print, online, mobile).

When researching *Sports Journalism* (2006) I was struck by how much digital culture was changing organizational practice for sports journalists. The Sports Editor of the London *Times* newspaper told me he could remember when a journalist sent from London to cover a Newcastle United v Arsenal in the north of England, would be off the grid until you heard from them from inside the stadium, shortly before the game. Now, he recalled, they were in constant contact with the office via mobile or email. They would be expected to upload copy for the website while traveling on the train to the game, and also be online engaging with readers. All this before they arrived in Newcastle to cover the match where they would file after the match and then when having attended post match media conferences. For most of the sports journalists I spoke with then and since digital technology has been liberating (no more frantic running around on foreign trips trying to find a phone that works so you can file copy back home!). However the broader impact of digitalization, when combined with the other factors mentioned above that have re-shaped popular culture in the latter part of the 20th century have also provided pause for thought for many journalists.

The rise of public relations (PR) and the synergy that has occurred between the sports industry and the wider entertainment industry has seen once well established practices in say Hollywood become increasing de rigor in UK sports culture (Boyle, 2006, Boyle 2012). Indeed there are now more PRs than journalists in the UK (although many PRs are former journalists of course) and the journalism industry – specifically the print sector - has been re-structured with the downsizing of the sector as newspapers struggle to find a viable business model in an age of 'free online content' (Davies, 2008). The shift of power to stars, athletes (with their agents, sponsors and media managers) has resulted in issues of access and copy and picture approval all becoming issues for journalists. Of course many of these challenges are not new. Indeed the issue of trust (or the lack of it) between sports stars and journalists has a long and infamous history.

As Tim Adam notes in his brilliant dissection of tennis star John McEnroe whose relations with sports journalists could be frosty had even by the early 1980s even less time for news journalists working for the British tabloid press:

‘When the young Alastair Campbell of the *Mirror* (latter architect of New Labour’s PR machine and the Prime Minister’s spin doctor in chief), fronted him up to ask if he accepted that millions of youngsters copied him, McEnroe reportedly ‘snarled’ and said pointedly: ‘You should take a look in the *Mirror* and see who is screwing up the kids’. Before adding, somewhat presciently, ‘The power you have is sad.’ When Campbell asked him if he had any regrets about his behaviour. McEnroe responded (prophetically, for a generation of parliamentary correspondents) that ‘My only regret is that I have to deal with people like you’. (Adams, 2004: 36/37).

One of the characteristics of digital journalism is the breaking down of that traditional division between the categories of news and sports. The use of social media and protecting the reputation of brands online are widely recognized by the PR industry in the UK as two of the major issues confronting its members. In an era of fragmenting digital audiences, sports ability (some sports of course more than others) to offer compelling national and international content makes it a potent cultural form. It is also a cultural form that has had to adapt and address the impact that television money has had on its structures of competition and governance. This process has led to a growing realization of the role that PR plays in the sports communication mix (Hopwood, et al, 2010). As I write Channel 4 (a minority PSB channel in the UK) has posted its highest audience weekend share for seven years on the back of its coverage of the 2012 London Paralympics (not traditionally viewed as a top television sports event). As sporting culture became ever more central to the entertainment industries that shape and drive much of popular culture, so too then did celebrity and its attendant news values as a content hungry media environment become more central to sports.

A central argument of *Sports Journalism* (2006), was that the established view that sports journalists sat pretty close to the bottom of the journalistic hierarchy (political/foreign correspondents were at the apex) was increasingly outdated. It seemed to me that the processes that were transforming sports and media organizations (digitization among them) meant that many of the practices and experiences of sports journalists were increasingly generic to journalism and journalists more generally. Of course differences remain, with for example many sports journalists spending more time on the road and out of the office than their colleagues, but as the pace of information flow increased, the rise of PR, the always on nature of social and digital media and the organizational restructuring of the media industries were impacting across differing spheres of journalism and eradicating some of the more entrenched journalistic practices (Marr, 2004). For example, one impact of the more digitally demand-led media in the UK, was to see a rise in the amount of media coverage and space devoted to sports related content.

Sports were now also about politics, business and governance, as well as sporting endeavor and competition. While certain sporting events were always mega media events, the age of digital sports coverage has expanded even this process. London 2012's Olympic coverage was driven by LOCOG's 24-hour media hub (80,000 square metres) that helped service over 20,000 journalists, broadcasters and photographers. While the London Media Centre (LMC) in central London catered for an additional 10,000 non-accredited journalists covering the 2012 Olympics (Wicks, 2012). The BBC via its online presence covered every event and the advent of the first truly social media Games meant that any journalist not on social media was viewed by their editor as not doing their job. In his analysis of the use of social media and political journalism in the coverage of the 2010 UK general election, Nic Newman (2010) argued that:

Even veteran [political] journalists have been surprised at how social and digital media continues to change the way journalism is practiced; the growth and success of live blogging, the adoption of micro-blogging, the shortening of the news cycle and the growth of real-time conversation between political and media elites. More journalists are recognizing that social media are not just something for the web team, but are relevant to every member of the newsroom.

While those comments relate to political journalists they are equally applicable to those working in the sports sector. To the list of real-time conversations listed above one might also add that fans increasingly engage directly with key sports journalists who tweet (Boyle, 2012).

Digital technology then has disrupted aspects of the traditional relationship in journalism between the journalist, the media and the audience. Sports journalism has in many ways been one of the areas of journalism most profoundly affected by this change. Sporting discourse is often about emotions and opinions deeply held and readily expressed by athletes and fans. Reflecting on his experience as the Chief Football Correspondent for the *The Guardian* newspaper reporting from his sixth FIFA World Cup in 2010 in South Africa, Kevin McCarra argued:

I believe that it is in football that the relationship between writer and reader has most changed, particularly since those roles are no longer fixed. Access to the internet, I am glad to say, has done away entirely with the silly assumption that journalists have access to a higher knowledge. Countless websites cover all aspects of football in virtually every nation. If any player at a World Cup is an unknown quantity it will be purely because the research has not been carried out with sufficient thoroughness [] Websites, whether statistical, solemn, esoteric or comic, disseminate limitless quantities of information about even the most obscure footballers and managers. The press fool themselves if they suppose for an instant that they can be a priesthood who own a sacred knowledge (McCarra, 2010)

Sports journalists have always traded on the myth of access to the inside story around sports culture and their ability to bring this to their audience. The US Sportswriter Leonard Koppett (2003) superbly documented this process in his memoir completed shortly before his death that also examined the changing media culture that shapes the modern sportswriter. He noted how each new media technology, initially radio, then television and finally the internet all changed the relationship between sport and those tasked with professionally reporting and making sense of it for a readership. Taking the long view of communications culture, social media can be seen as part of an evolving tradition within sports journalism that offers aspects of change, but also continuity.

To that end, social media networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer simply the latest challenge and opportunity for sports journalism as a profession. There are struggles for continuity in sports journalism in the survival of established codes and conventions of work, for authority and exclusivity, as well as innovative departures as sports journalists master new technologies, as well as integrate new forms of communication into the production of sports news content.

As the audience increasingly has access to televised media conferences and official websites and can also follow the latest tweets from key sports figures, the sports journalist has to offer something more than the supposed ringside seat. Thus, for example, Charlie Lambert (2012) argues sports journalists need to raise their game, if they are to retain their journalistic credibility so crucial to the success of their newspaper's print and online brand. As fans access increasingly generic aggregator sports news sites, the journalist needs to add real value and insight that makes *their* twitter feed important to follow. In a recent discussion with Richard Wilson, the award-winning sportswriter of the Scottish national newspaper, *The Herald*, he identified two key aspects of how social media has changed and enhanced his work as a journalist.

Two reasons really why I use social media. When I was a freelance, I used Twitter to raise my profile and showcase my work. I still do that, but also use it now to interact with readers. You have to sift through responses at times, but you get a different perspective and interesting feedback. I'd say the readers like the interaction, too, so it works both ways. Also, it's often a fairly good source of news, information and analysis (interview with author, 13 December, 2011).

I don't believe however we are all journalists now. Insight, perception and truthful analysis are all traits that add value to simply reporting, that said, the sports

conversation between sports, players, fans and the media is changing, and once the genie of social media is out of the bottle, it is out for good.

Looking Ahead for Communication and Sport Research

As he reflected on the experience of covering his 10th summer Olympics, Patrick Collins, the veteran Chief Sportswriter for the *Mail on Sunday* newspaper in the UK noted:

As a media games it worked. I think it has got to a point where news is so quick that the competition to get there first is, in a sense, pointless. The element of speed is lost when everything is so fast. What came out of these Olympics is the back-story; it seemed very medalist had a fascinating tale to tell. It was strangely affecting. There were a lot of interesting people (Wilson, 2012).

This quote reflects a number of themes that will continue to shape the relationship between communication, sports and journalism in particular. Technology and its ability to enhance and disrupt journalistic practice will continue to evolve at pace. In the digital age of screens and content (Boyle, 2010) traditional notions of the print sports journalist will continually change. Recent research (Enders Analysis, 2012) indicates that 125 million new smart phones were sold worldwide between April and June 2012, a 30% year on year growth. While ConsumerLab (2012) report into international television trends indicate that 67% of television viewers are using smart phones, tablets and laptops to watch television, while 62% are using social media while watching television. What are the economic implications of this process for professional, funded print and online journalism? New business models please. Yet, sports content remains among the most compelling aspects of journalism due in part to the human narratives of sports which print and online media do so much to enhance and sustain through the provision of what Collins above calls the 'back story'. Compelling sports journalism will always have a value.

Other areas in the converging digital age of growing research interest will be around the policing and control of media rights and attendant copyright issues, of which sports content, and in Europe, football in particular, are at the core. This highlights another significant trend, put simply sports are too important to be left the sole domain of sports journalists. As sports culture interfaces with law, business, politics, and international relations then issues of governance, rights and citizenship will all become part of what is a broadening sports communication agenda. This agenda has not always been reflected or addressed within mainstream sports journalism. The age of many-to-many communication will change this, but the paradox remains that this will

also require professional rigorous, uncomplot and properly funded journalism at a time when economic turbulence characterizes the journalistic industry.

Continuity and change will continue to shape communications and sport in what Williams called 'the long revolution' between communication and cultural change (Boyle 2010). The study of communications and sport should continue to tell us truths about the values we have as a society. In a sense this is where I came in and is what continues to make the study of media sports so enriching and surprising for any communication researcher, even after all these years.

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